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Especially for Homemakers

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VISIT THE VIRGIN PRAIRIE . . .

. . . A Family Outing You'll Not Forget

Editor's Note: Iowa has set aside four virgin prairie reserves. Your highway map shows their locations: the 120-acre Cayler prairie 3 miles west of Gull Point in Dickinson County; the 110-acre Kalsow prairie 4 miles north of Manson across the line in Pocahontas County; the 199-acre Ada Hayden prairie 4 miles west of Lime Springs in Howard County, and the 25- acre Sheeder prairie 4 miles west and 1 mile north of Guthrie Center in Guthrie County.

WHAT WAS IT like in Iowa in midsummer 100 years ago when covered wagons pushed across the rolling prairie land in search of a place to call home?

A hint of what it was like beckons to us now as we speed down the highway. Native grasses and colorful flowers still wave bravely from the roadsides, or the fence rows, or here and there from the country schoolhouse yard, or along the railroad right-of-way.

Time was, not so long ago, when you had a more intimate relationship with these grasses and flowers —for you walked to school, and you picked versions of these prairie plants to take home to mother. Perhaps grandmother would remark about times when the prairie stretched endlessly to the horizon.

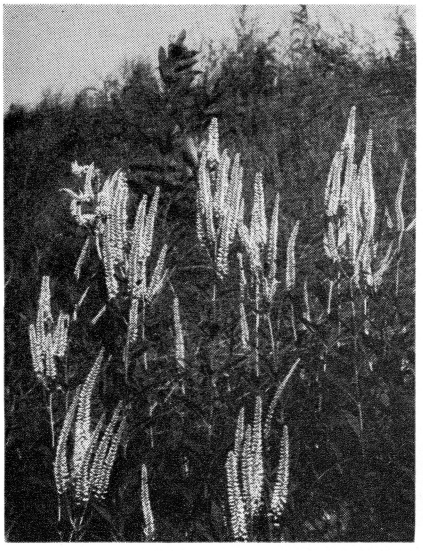
Time Stands Still . . .

A walk in the countryside can bring a renewed acquaintance with the native plant life that bestowed Iowa's rich soil. But to see the prairie as it was—untilled, undisturbed, ungrazed — is to take the children on a trek to the Hayden, Kalsow, Cayler or Sheeder prairie. For a span of a few hours, time stands still. This is the land of the pioneer family.

The Monotonous Magnitude . . .

If, as you step into the prairie, you think it doesn't look spectacular, put it down to the fact you are the newcomer. Early settlers had this impression, too. "Behold the prairies in all their splendor and all their monotonous magnitude," wrote one observer of the scene. "An expanse of nothingness," wrote another.

If you think it looks a bit unkempt, reflect again. This is not the "mowed grass" look of the family lawn, or the trimmed and sprayed look of the roadside. It is the territory of millions of years of plant growth surviving the sways of climate including prolonged drouth. This is the territory the pioneer



Looking like a tapered candle, Culver's root grows 3 to 4 feet high with at least four leaves at each node or joint.

Blooming in late summer, the blue bottle gentian is cup-like when the flower is open, although some never open.

The most common tall grass of the native Iowa prairies is big bluestem, often called "turkey foot" because of the seed stalks branching into toes. (Photos by Rod Fox.)

plow found hard to penetrate—deep root systems that could withstand the tortures of nature.

Changeless Yet Changing . . .

Look closer. There's a mixture of nature present here in living grass and flowers. Tall and short, tiny and exuberant, early-growing and late-growing, wave after wave of growth from spring through summer—a stable, but ever-changing panorama of life. So stable are the root systems and so interrelated are the plant families that outsiders (quack grass, for example) can't encroach.

Undaunted by Fire . . .

Prairie fire! The very words were an alert to Indian and settler alike. For the prairie fire could run before the wind. But the prairie plant had long lived with fire. It had adapted to the forces of nature. And, once the fire burned out, new vigor burst forth from the seeds lying dormant in the soil and the roots deep within the ground. Today, in its vigilant care of the prairie reserves, the Iowa Conservation Commission uses burning as a means to manage the prairie.

What is the prairie? The French-Canadian, not the settler from the East, gave the name to this wonder of nature. He saw an open area, vast in sweep, covered with low-growing plants dominated with grasses and few, if any, shrubs. This is what early Iowans saw, for the prairie once occupied 84 percent of the land area of Iowa, broken only by forest growth along the streams and rivers. Early survey records often carried the notation "No trees to mark boundary lines."

Plant families abound in the prairie. For example, in the Cayler prairie, you'll find the horsetail family, the cattail family, the grass family, the rush family; the iris, orchid, willow and rose families; also the four-o'clock family, the pink family, mustard and buttercup and flax families—just to name a very few.

A Public Heritage . . .

Iowa's virgin prairie plots are reminders of the past. They are a public heritage for coming generations. But they are more than this. They serve, in a sense, as a measuring stick against which scientists can appraise the changes wrought since the ground was broken in Iowa and our modern day agriculture was born. Among objectives which brought our prairie reserves into being were: (1) To secure under state protection representative areas of virgin prairie to serve as natural reserves of native plants, animals and original soil profiles; (2) "to afford historic examples of the original landscape and to provide protected, undisturbed laboratories for scientific research."

Sequence of Prairie Species in Iowa . . .

Our native prairie reserves put on a "show" all summer long. A few plants among the many to look for are listed here as a guide.

Spring

Pasque flower: First flower of spring appearing in large numbers in the Hayden prairie.

Shooting star: Abundant in the Hayden prairie in later spring along with buttercups, orange flowers of puccoon (the bloodroot is a member), blue-eyed grass (a grass-like plant with tiny blue flowers).

Early Summer (June)

Prairie phlox: Clusters of flowers with five petals from pink to white lasting into midsummer.

Porcupine grass: Matures in June with seed spears over four inches long, waving with any slight breeze, usually in the drier places. One of the earliest prairie grasses to make seed.

Purple coneflower: On a stem with a single burry cone the size of a hickory nut; with drooping lavender petals lasting for a few days. The bur remains all summer; often used in dried floral arrangements.

Compass plant: Leaves are conspicuous, large and flat with deeply formed finger lobes. Used as a compass on cloudy days because of the tendency for the large leaves to be aligned north and south. Flowers are large, yellow like a sunflower and scattered up and down a stalk up to eight feet tall.

Midsummer (July)

Prairie roses: Usually everywhere by this time; often blooming earlier.

Blue flag: A wild iris in the wettest spots, occasionally in water.

Slough grass: With long, coarse curving leaves; in low areas.

Wild rye: Nodding heads of this grass resemble overgrown wheat or barley curving over.

Coneflowers: Bright yellow flowers; many to a bush.

Black-eyed susans: Slightly similar to the yellow coneflowers, but larger and with a black center to the flower.

Goldenrods, prairie clovers, and sunflowers: Just beginning to bloom.

Late Summer (August)

Tall grasses: The tall grasses such as little bluestem, big bluestem, Indiangrass, and switchgrass begin to flower. Little bluestem is found on drier places such as sandy ridges or slopes as bunches with feathery seeds maturing late in summer. Big bluestem is probably the most common grass of the Iowa prairies; often called "turkey foot" because of the parting of the seed stalks into toes. Indian grass has a slender spire of seeds, soft and perhaps resembling a plume. Switchgrass forms a spray of tiny seeds, often a foot-long cluster.

Blazing stars: Foot-long columns of purple flowers.

Asters: Small, bright-colored, daisy-like flowers; some blooming even after light frost.

—Roger Q. Landers
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